

# Middle English « Losenger »

## Sketch of an etymological and semantic enquiry

It is an honour and a pleasure to be allowed to address this assembly of so much talent and learning ; and I am grateful for the permission to make my remarks in English.

The contact (and in various degrees : the blending) of alien languages has been frequent, even in recorded history, in the North-West of Europe, on both sides of *La Manche* ; and the struggles and interactions in this area have a special importance, because the languages there developed have in the event become the vehicles of a great culture. These are large matters. To the consideration of them I aim now to add no more than a footnote. What I have to do is to examine afresh one item, one word only, produced by the important events discussed yesterday by Professor GAMILLSCHEG : *the Germanic invasions of Northern Gaul*.

To this word Professor GAMILLSCHEG actually referred. But independently I selected it, the Middle English word (of French origin) *losenger*, because I believe that a fresh scrutiny of its etymology may afford a glimpse (if no more) into the complexities of the contacts of Germanic and Latin in Northern Gaul — even though this interesting, and elusive, not to say treacherous, word has often been studied by scholars of superior learning in the field of Romance philology. I announced this in English or late Middle English form, to indicate that it is principally the Germanic and English aspect of its etymology that I wish to discuss. But the true history of all words is complex : they are all caught in a web of connexions and associations. Few have in fact the straight lineal descent so convenient to Etymological Dictionaries : few spring direct like Athene from the head of Zeus ; far more have, like the Norse god Heimdallr, nine mothers. *Losenge* is no exception. And I can only hope in

the time at my disposal to indicate a line of argument, and can neither cite all the evidence nor follow all the 'red herrings', the false scents, which the treacherous *losengeour* has strewn upon his trail.

It was in Chaucer that I first made the acquaintance of that dubious character the *losengeour*. My earliest enquiries about him were addressed to a worthy schoolmaster forty-five years ago; and this was what I was told: 'He was a flattering liar, and he was so called because he used the kind of language found on *lozenges*. Now these were panes of glass, and they were commonly used in church-windows to record the virtues of benefactors. But since the benefactors had no virtues, save the possession of money, a man who imitated their style was naturally called a *losenger*'. This is more or less Darmesteter's view up-side-down. Neither view has the support of evidence. But there are alas! no gulfs of meaning too wide for human ingenuity to bridge, especially the ingenuity of the etymologist in his study.

Nonetheless it must be accounted not the least of the strange accidents of this particular etymological problem that there should exist in Old French two words *losenge*, words of a sound-pattern at once unusual and identical, that cannot be connected at all, except by such fantasies. They are, in fact, (as far as the evidence goes) *not* related at all either in form or sense. The one, which I will call *losenge*<sup>1</sup> is the word with which I am primarily concerned. The other, *losenge*<sup>2</sup>, a rhombus, a diamond-shaped figure (especially in heraldry), a small cake or tablet, a pane of glass, exists still in French; and in English, where a form *loseine* (little evidenced in France) has also had a considerable history in the form *losene*, *losen*. But though the etymology of this 'red herring', this *losenge*<sup>2</sup>, is obscure and difficult, I cannot now be drawn aside to follow it. As I pass it by, I will only comment that here we have an illustration of the fact that even *the closest relationship in sound* may be insufficient to bring two words into effective contact (save in the scholar's study), *by itself*, if the senses, and the normal contexts of use, are too far apart.

To return to *losenge*<sup>1</sup>. Long after the days that I have spoken of, I came back to the passage in Chaucer where I had first

met the *losengeour*, in pursuit of another nefarious character, the *totelere*. There in the *Legend of Good Women* one may read lines addressed by Alceste to the God of Love :

*For in your court is many a losengeour,  
and many a queynte totelere accusour,  
that taboure in your eres many a thing  
for hate or fore jelous imagining.*

The *totelere* has been brought to book elsewhere ; for Professor D'ARDENNE has studied this creature, his name, and its connexions, in *The Devil's Spout* with a wealth of learning and illustration which (even if I could emulate it) would not on this occasion be possible. Though the *losengeour*, in fact, deserves no less attention.

In any case : who and what was he ? What was his function or mischief in the Court of Love ? A *flatterer* as the editors and glossaries say (of this passage), or a *slanderer*, a *backbiter*, a *liar*, as the context in this Chaucerian passage (and in many other passages elsewhere in English, French, and Provençal) seems rather to require ? And whence came his curious name ?

As far as English etymology is concerned, this word is simply referred to Old French, and for the moment we will not consider further the *losengeour* or his fate in mediaeval England. In Old French the English scholar finds not only *losengeour*, and the verb *losengier*, but their source : *losenge*<sup>1</sup>. Of this word it is important at once to define the sense, sufficiently to distinguish it from *losenge*<sup>2</sup>, the rhombus. 'Flattery', or 'malicious flattery', is the definition that would probably usually be given (in English terms). But in fact the sense of this word-group presents itself rather as a 'spectrum', ranging from *praise* (exaggerated perhaps, or inappropriate) > *flattery* (with ulterior motive) > *malicious flattery* (with evil motive) > *slander* > (simple) *lying*. A dark line, or break in the continuous shading of the colour, may probably be detected between the third and fourth 'bands', between *malicious flattery* and *slander* ; but the last two bands are the broader and more observable. Or in other terms the weight of this sense-range is found rather in *lying* than in *praise* <sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, only a summary method of dealing with a complex

This spectrum and range is enough in itself to make one suspect *a priori* that we have here a *semantic* product of *blending*. But the immediate and natural etymological connexion that presents itself is with the derivatives in Old French of Latin *laudem*, *laudes*, *laudare*. Especially with O.Fr. *los*, for instance. Since *los* is certainly an Old and early French word for 'praise', which was also adopted in Middle English of the fourteenth century, it is not necessary, for the present purpose, to consider at length the precise origin of this form — that is, the source of its [s] : whether it be from the nominative *laus*, under the influence of Church Latin ; or from the plural *laudes*. Yet this 'irregular' [s] is the second thread in the tangle that malicious chance has woven about the word *losenge*. That this [s] could intrude into the middle of words derived from it is sufficiently shown by the form *aloser* 'to praise', whence are derived Middle English *alosen* (and *losen*), and Middle High German *lösen*. Nonetheless, the combined consideration of (a) the stem-form, (b) the suffix *-enge*, and (c) the 'spectrum of senses', should warn one that simple derivation from O.Fr. *los* or *aloser* is unlikely to be adequate, and Romance scholars have in fact in more recent times recognized this.

Words can and often do 'deteriorate' in sense. A movement from pure *praise* and *approval* > *flattery* is credible enough. It appears to have occurred in dialectal developments of *aloser*<sup>1</sup>. But in Old French the words *los*, *aloser* ; the more direct deriv-

matter involving many passages in French, Provençal, and English, to look no further. The function of the *losengeour*, especially in the Court of Love, really requires a separate study. But since much is necessarily omitted, it must here suffice to say that according to the *Roman de la Rose* (as in 1034 ff. and other places) his operations were principally *slander* and *base adulation* (even of evil deeds), rather than 'flattery', and *slander* was his main business.

<sup>1</sup> As cited by VON WARTBURG, p. 210, under '*Laus lob*'. It is probably shown also by *lösen* in MHG in the sense 'schmeicheln', verb and noun. As in *Iwein* 7591, also in *Tristan* (Gottfried), *Trojan War* (Konrad), *Meier Helmbrecht*. It is noticeable that this movement is specially (exclusively?) associated with *medial* [s]. It is due rather to the influence of *losenge* than its explication. In *Iwein* 7591 at any rate *âne lösen* is dependent on the *par losange* of Chrétien. Another quite distinct movement is > fame > notoriety ; as in ME *alosed for theft*. But this is neither flattery nor lying.



If there was, it would produce in O.Fr. *loenge*<sup>1</sup>. O.Fr. *loenge* certainly existed and exists as *louange*, in the pure sense of 'praise', 'approval'. The forms in Provençal, such as *lauzemia*, *lauzenha* (beside *vendenha*), also appear to confirm the existence of *\*laudemia*. It thus seems probable that we must envisage the following events :

1. A Germanic word of the form *lausing-* f. entered the language of Gaul; it acquired in the North the Gallicized form *\*lauzenga* (?*\*lauzendža*), f. 'lying', and there made contact with a Romance word *\*laudenja*, *\*laudenža*, f. 'praise' < *laudēmia*, a word quite unrelated in origin, but of very similar phonetic pattern. The meanings were also originally unrelated, but (unlike the case of *losenge*<sup>2</sup>) were of similar order and liable to appear in similar contexts. The Romance word was unaffected, or much less affected than the alien, but the alien developed a sense-range derived from the fusion of 'lying' and 'praise', running from 'false accusation' to 'false adulation'.

2. The same Germanic word in a form *lauzenga* (a form actually frequent in Provençal) made similar contact in the South with *lauzemia*, *lauzenha*. But later the influence of the Northern form may have been felt also in the South, as was the case with other words of Romance or alien origin<sup>2</sup>.

This, of course, states an intricate matter with undue brevity. Whether it is a reading of the variant forms and textual evidence that commends itself to Romance scholars, is not, however, for

<sup>1</sup> Its precise mode of generation, and its relation to O.Fr. *blastenge* m. (often opposed to *loenge*), *\*blastemium*, and other words of similar ending (m. f.) I must leave to Romance scholars. The formation is (I suppose) supported by the evidence for *laudemium* in Medieval Latin (whence Provençal *lauzimi*, Span. *laudemio*) : though this usually has the legal sense of a payment due to a feudal superior upon the sale of property, the sense of 'praise' is also given in the dictionaries. Cf. O.Fr. M.Fr. *los* Fr. *lods*. I here leave aside another curious side-track : that the derivatives of the Gmc. stem *laus* (especially of the causative verb *lausjan*) frequently developed very similar senses : see Lexer s. v. *losunge*. Already in the Gothic Gospel of St. Luke we find *lausjan* used = to exact a tax-payment.

<sup>2</sup> This is not essentially different from an assertion that the Germanic word (as a loan) travelled from North to South at a period sufficiently early for it to retain *au* and *enga*. The *au* of Provençal may, however, have been due to *lauzar* (*laudare*). In any case, in North and South the vowel of the stem is the same in the older and in the adopted words.

my immediate purpose of primary importance. For, *by whatever processes it entered the dialects of Gaul*, and there exerted its malign influence, it is, I think, impossible to deny the intrusion of an alien Germanic word into the *laus-laudare* group in those dialects. Faced with the meanings of *losenge*, *lauzenga*, and with the similarity in pattern and meaning of such Germanic words as *\*lausung-*, *\*lausing-* (the immediate predecessors of Anglo-Saxon *lēasung*, *lēasing* 'lying') no other conclusion is possible.

But if that is so, the affair is not ended, and more remains to be said. It is inadequate and misleading to reduce this event to an etymological statement : '*lausinga* Fränkisch : lüge', as in MEYER-LÜBKE's dictionary.

All etymological statements, and especially those in dictionaries, are constrained to a brevity that must appear dogmatic. But this compressed statement obscures what is, I believe, the most interesting point of this Germanic word. This point is, perhaps, best brought out by making in opposition a statement equally succinct and dogmatic : '*lausinga* was not Frankish ; it was English'. The first gift, perhaps, of *perfidia anglosaxonica* to Gaul.

Of course, if pressed, I should modify this word *English*, first to *Anglo-Saxon* : meaning that type or variety of Germanic speech that eventually became dominant in southern Britain, where it was called English by its speakers ; secondly by admitting that Britain was not the place where this Germanic dialect developed its most salient characteristics, nor the only region in which it was (probably) to be found in the Dark Ages. Other titles to fit current speculations might be used ; but I will retain for the present purpose the title 'Anglo-Saxon', because the etymon *\*lausinga* shows (a) in the sense of its stem, and (b) in the form and function of its ending, features that are characteristic of actual recorded Anglo-Saxon, and are nowhere else clearly exhibited. In the same way, observing the Old Spanish word, *anviso*, *ambiso* 'wise, prudent', I should be inclined to reject the etymology of R. E. W. *\*antevisum* : not so much because that compound did not exist, and had it existed should have meant 'foreseen' or 'seen in front', but because in the area

of Indo-European languages concerned the *active* sense of this participial formation is characteristic (a special mark) of the Germanic, not of the Italic or Celtic branches. The exact counterpart is, moreover, actually recorded in Anglo-Saxon *andwīs* 'wise, clever'.

In this case *Anglo-Saxon* may be regarded simply as giving evidence of a once more widely spread word in Germanic, since Anglo-Saxon shares with Old High German and Gothic several similar formations with the prefix *and(a)*.

But when we wish to choose not among the Indo-European dialects but the Germanic dialects, a similar principle holds good: the use of a feminine ending forming verbal abstracts *ung* varying with *ing* is a feature of Anglo-Saxon, exclusive even of Old Saxon (though probably not of Frisian). The sense of 'lying' associated with the stem *laus* is characteristic of Anglo-Saxon to the exclusion even of Frisian.

It is not possible here to discuss the etymology of the Germanic stem *laus*. But there can be no doubt that we have in it a native Common Germanic word, which appears in all the later dialects. Its basic sense was 'loose', the implications of which: (a) 'not properly fixed, unsteady' on the one hand and (b) 'not bound, free', were present in the Common Germanic period. One use is common to all later dialects: the use in compounds, in which *-laus* became virtually an adjectival suffix, 'free from, bereft of', as in Gothic *gudalaus*, (gottlos, godless). But the meanings of the simple adjective show in the recorded later languages some dialectal differences.

Gothic *laus*: the characteristic sense is *κενός*, 'void, idle, worthless', though the sense 'free from' is recorded.

For *lös* in Old and Middle High German there is a range of interconnected senses that might be divided thus: 'loose': (a) free; (b) bare, devoid, bereft (of); (c) slack, lax, unrestrained — with good implications (such as 'gay, sportive'), or bad (such as 'wanton, impudent'); (d) worthless, frivolous.

Old Saxon *lös*, at least in the *Héliand*, is practically limited to use with the genitive in the sense 'free from, devoid of'. The sense 'false' often attributed to *lös* in *lös-word*, *lös-werk* is not

in fact present, even contextually<sup>1</sup>. Old Frisian *lās* has as main senses 'loose, free'. It may also mean 'gay'.

Old Norse *lauss* has the characteristic sense 'unfixed, unrestrained'. Its pejorative trend is to silliness, wantonness, lasciviousness, not to falsehood.

Against this inevitably inadequate sketch (of the older idioms), Anglo-Saxon stands out remarkably, not least in contrast to what are in general its nearest associates : Old Frisian, and Old Saxon. In Anglo-Saxon the suffixed *-lēas*, of course, exists, dissociated from the normal adjective. The use of *lēas*, with the genitive, 'bereft of' is also still found, though it is mainly limited to the archaic and special language of verse. But the whole central weight of this extremely common word is thrown on to the sense : 'false, feigned, untrue, incorrect'. Of this notion *lēas* is the most usual expression. It is the sense of *lēas* in an enormous majority of instances. As a neuter noun *lēas* has the sense 'the false, falsehood' only and no other.

The 'Anglo-Saxon' development of sense is thus one of those curious aberrations in the use of a common stock of words that may be found to characterize a restricted dialect area, which otherwise shares many features with its neighbours. It is an event in the history of Germanic speech long after its dispersal, but one still far enough back to have had time to dominate almost the whole sphere of the adjective *\*laus* in this one type of Germanic. The sense-development probably proceeded primarily from the branch 'unsteady > unreliable' (rather than from the branch 'worthless, frivolous'). For it is worth remarking semantically that this special development is characteristic precisely of Anglo-Saxon, which has abandoned both the ancient stems meaning 'true in fact' : first prehistorically that represented by *verus*, G. *wahr* ; later the derivative of the verb 'to be' (*sop*, *sooth*), and has substituted for them the *trēow*, *true* 'the dependable'.

There is a further point that may be observed. The earliest

<sup>1</sup> Actually *lōsword* is the counterpart of Gothic *lausawaurdei* (λαυσαυρδεί or λωσωνεία), Old Norse *lausyrði*. It occurs in a moralization on the Parable of the Vineyard, against waste of time in youth. *lōswerk* appears to mean 'wicked deeds' generally.



derivative of adjectival *laus* was the causative verb *lausjan*. This occurs in all the later languages, and, with or without prefixes, retained its earlier sense 'release' (let go, or take away), and did not even in Anglo-Saxon follow the fortunes of the basic adjective. The later derivative verbs were dependent on the later senses of the adjective. It is again only Anglo-Saxon that possessed *\*lausōn*, *\*lausōjan* > A. S. *lēasian*, which meant simply and only « to tell lies »<sup>1</sup>. It is thus only in Anglo-Saxon that the noun *\*lausungō*/*\*lausungō* > *lēasung/ing* is 'at home', so to speak, since this formation is precisely a verbal abstract requiring or implying the existence of a verb.

This is remarkable and significant. The semantic development of *\*laus* in Anglo-Saxon is unique; and the occasional appearances elsewhere of a similar sense, or the contextual suggestion of it, offer no real parallel. But the course of true etymologies does not run smooth, unless much is concealed. The existence of *lausung* in Old Norse, usually glossed 'falsehood', cannot be passed over; but it may conveniently be dealt with together with the suffix.

The eventually important and productive feminine verbal suffix *\*ungo/ingo* is of obscure origin. It is not common to the whole Germanic field; but in the so-called West Germanic dialects it became a normal means of forming verbal abstract nouns, primarily from weak verbs. It is not found in recorded Gothic. It is probably historically true to speak of its being 'introduced' later into the Scandinavian area; for in Old Norse verbs of the 'first weak conjugation' can form abstract nouns with *-ing* (as e. g. the ON. *kenning* from *kenna*, *\*kannjan*), but other weak verbs do not employ either *ing* or *ung*. The ending *-ung* was used (sparingly) in Old Norse, but it was not associated with verbs. ON. *lausung* must thus be regarded as two distinct words or formations. *Lausung*<sup>1</sup> was an abstract noun belonging directly to the Norse adjective *lauss*; this is well-attested, and meant 'looseness', either 'being unsettled', or 'laxity lascivious-

<sup>1</sup> The equivalents are not found in Gothic or Old Norse, or in Old Frisian. In Old Saxon *lōsōn* was an active verb, more or less the same in sense as *lōsian*. In Middle High German *lōsen*, derivative of OHG *lōsōn*, meant 'to be *lōs*', in its various German senses.

ness' : a *lausungar-madr* was not a liar but a libertine. *Lausung*<sup>2</sup> was a rare word (especially in early documents), a readymade loan from Anglo-Saxon, not associated with the Norse adjective with which it never agreed in sense, meaning 'deception, lying'. The first is still current in Icelandic ; its characteristic alliterative grouping was with *leik*. The second was not part of the normal vocabulary, and is not found in modern Icelandic<sup>1</sup> ; its characteristic grouping is with *lygi*. The borrowing of *lausung* 'deception' probably occurred at widely separated periods : (a) early, as in *lausung við lygi*, 'deceit in exchange for lies', occurring only in two adjacent passages of *Hávamál* ; (b) much later, as items in the known influence of the specific Anglo-Saxon of Britain upon Norse in the sphere of the Church and the homily : it occurs chiefly in such works as the *Mariu-saga*. The early borrowing is not an isolated event. The early verse of Norse and Anglo-Saxon both show stray examples of the vocabulary proper to the other. Thus two places in the *Elder Edda* offer the only examples in Norse of the sense 'bower, woman's room' for *búr* which is characteristic of English, as also is the alliterative collocation with 'bright' (seen in *björt í búi* 'bright in bower', in *Godrúnarkviða* II). Anglo-Saxon and Norse were never wholly out of touch, and later renewed especially close contact<sup>2</sup>.

From the French problem, then, ON. *lausung* can be set aside, except in so far as it reveals this Anglo-Saxon word for 'falsehood' as one of the successful words, characteristic in form or sense of that variety of Germanic, which tended to travel abroad, either earlier or later, like *boat*, or *lord*. If we return to consideration of the suffix, we observe that the variation of *ing* with *ung* in verbal function, in association with a weak verb of the type \**lausōn* (cited above), points to Anglo-Saxon, quite apart from the sense. But we must also consider the title *Frankish*. The absence of the variant *ing* from the West Germanic dialects, other than English and Frisian, and therefore

<sup>1</sup> The sense is not recognized by BLÖNDAL.

<sup>2</sup> Thus there is a late and isolated example in Anglo-Saxon of *lēasing* in the Norse sense 'laxity of morals, lasciviousness', as foreign to the native senses of *lēas* as is *lausung* 'deceit' to the Norse senses of *lauss*.

The language of these Psalm-fragments is probably not to be taken as representing the language of the Salic Franks or the Merovingians, but it may present a similar sort of language. In all other documents of an early period the sense 'false' of \**laus* ; the possession of a verbal abstract \**lausung/ing* 'deception' ; and the variation *ung/ing* in such abstracts are specially characteristic of Anglo-Saxon. Their combined presence in this document (one of its most peculiar features) therefore indicates the admixture in it of elements of the 'Anglo-Saxon' type. We meet in Old French also one other word of similar formation which may probably, though less clearly, be attributed to the same type of Germanic. That is *haenge*<sup>1</sup>. With this belongs the indubitably Germanic verb *hair* 'to hate', which also moved southward to Provençal *aïr*. This infinitive points rather to an antecedent Germanic form \**hatjan* (*hatinga*) than to the forms *haton* and *hatonga*, which are those found even in the Psalms and Glosses cited above. The Anglo-Saxon derivatives of the *hatjan*-type would be *hettan*, *hetting*, of which in fact traces are found in the participial *hettend* (also Old Saxon *hettiand*) and in the gloss *on-hettinga* 'persecutiones'.

In any case, after the formation and establishment in Old French of the word *losenge*, there remained no parallel to it in colloquial Germanic speech, save in the Anglo-Saxon language of Britain. And although in the passage of time, some hundreds of years, the Anglo-Saxon had proceeded from its ancient \**lausingu* (acc. sg. *lausinga*) > *læosing* > *lēasing* > *lēsing*, their identity was still recognizable. They were equated by those who knew both languages ; one result of which was that the O.Fr. *losenge* was not borrowed but translated by the native equivalent. It was only the derived French verb *losengier*, and especially the *losengeour*, with his courtly function, that were adopted. This is well illustrated by a famous passage in the history of King Lear, the first **English** treatment of a story later made renowned by SHAKESPEARE. To describe what Cordelia thought of the speeches of her elder sisters Wace uses

<sup>1</sup> The modern form *haine* is apparently related to it in the same way as the **Middle English** loan-word *loseine* is related to *losenge*.



the verb *losengier* and the noun *losenges*. Lazamon, of Arley Regis in Worcestershire, rehandling the passage renders it thus :

*Cordoille iherde þa lasinges  
 þe hire sustren seide þon kinge :  
 nom hire leaffulne huie  
 þat heo lizen wolden.*

This is the earliest recorded renewal of contact (before A.D. 1200). The *losengeour* had to wait some hundred and fifty years, before he appeared in English, in the courtly francized literature of the fourteenth century. He did not stay long. Words cannot be transplanted without peril. In English the *losengeour*, once naturalized (and so no longer limited to the literary associations of the Court) made contact with another base creature, a distant etymological kinsman, the *losel*, an idle wastrel. He fades away as an idle sluggard, and barely survives the Middle Age. The English charge the Scots with lack of humour (a *losenge* that most nations utter against others) ; but at any rate the Scots are fond of puns. So that when, in the beginning of the sixteenth century, Gavin DOUGLAS says that he *lies abed like a losengeour* (perhaps the last recorded use of the word in English language), we may detect the last echo of that *liar* and *slanderer*, who beginning his etymological career in an obscure Germanic dialect of the North-West, ended it in a Scottish pun.

Oxford

J. R. R. TOLKIEN